



## Bringing People in from the Cold

**When the mayor of Keene told Don Primrose '07 that Keene didn't have a homelessness problem, Primrose knew better. His Hundred Nights Shelter opened 15 days later.**

**by Gordon Peery**

You might say that Don Primrose started his life at Keene State College. He was born in Elliot Hall in 1959, when it was the community hospital. As a young boy, he spent a lot of time on campus while his mother (a single mother with three boys) pursued her education. He even served as a ball boy for Coach Dave Terry's basketball team.

When he was not on campus, Primrose lived in just about every town in the area, sometimes without a real home to speak of. He describes one summer living out of a tent in Acworth and having all sorts of boyish adventures, including being held by his feet and dangled into a well to rescue a puppy. When he wrote about this for a Keene Junior High English class, his essay received a failing grade. "This was supposed to be a true story," explained his teacher.



*Between his days as a ball boy for KSC and his current activities, Primrose (above) has lived a thick novel's worth of adventures.*

Fast forward to December 2009, when Primrose was having breakfast with his longtime friend, Keene's mayor, Dale Pregent. The mayor mentioned casually that Keene did not really have a homelessness problem. Primrose, knowing otherwise, vowed to build a homeless shelter within two weeks.

He slightly underestimated the timing – it took him 15 days to open the Hundred Nights Shelter, which, between its opening on January 5, 2010, and closing for the season on March 22, provided 1,231 beds to 96 homeless men and women. Meanwhile, the facility opened a year-round drop-in center for homeless people.

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The shelter organization was established and initially managed by Primrose himself (with the help of numerous volunteers), in order to get it off the ground without being delayed by the inevitable bureaucracy.

With the infrastructure now intact and in compliance, Primrose has finally been able to turn the shelter over to a properly established nonprofit entity.

While various Keene city boards and officials were supportive of his efforts in principle and in fact, the journey of the past year was not always without friction. Primrose's commitment to the task took precedence over required or recommended procedures. It's not in Primrose's nature to back down or slow down.

**Hundred Nights Shelter Mission Statement** To be a community working together to meet the needs of our neighbors. To be a source of hope and respect for everyone, working toward a day when no one is homeless.

Between his days as a ball boy for KSC and his current activities, Primrose has lived a thick novel's worth of adventures. After high school, a stint in the Coast Guard found him doing drug enforcement in Virginia. Returning to this area, he enrolled at KSC, working the night shift at Central Screw.

College soon took a back seat as he got married, started working construction, and then headed out for Arizona with his wife and three-month-old son. After injuring a finger on a construction job, Primrose was told he'd need to be out of work for several weeks, but he sidestepped unemployment by starting his own company and going back to work. By 1985, he had built up the company enough to sell it, planning to "retire" back in New Hampshire. Primrose bought a farm in Swanzey but he was unable to stay idle, so he started another construction company. Eventually Primrose sold the Swanzey farm to buy another farm and home for his family in Sullivan. However, he had not been there long when his wife left, leaving him a single father of three children.

As his own children grew up and went off (they have all been or are enrolled at Keene State), Primrose began volunteering at Fall Mountain High School, and this led to his realization that he would like to teach.

He re-enrolled at KSC with the intention of becoming a history teacher. Then, in his junior year, in spite of being in excellent physical condition, Primrose suffered a heart attack at the age of 46. The following year, he was hit with a subdural hematoma, which required brain surgery. He was unable to return to classes until three weeks before graduation.

Though the College was willing to work with him to make provisions to graduate later, he jumped in and got his work done. One of his favorite stories involves him walking across campus with a portion of his long, black mane shaved, revealing the staples from his surgery. This sight drew an exclamation from a fellow student: "Hey, dude, cool piercings!"

With a degree in hand but the threat of health problems lingering, Primrose opted not to pursue a full-time teaching job. Instead he's working part-time on theatrical productions and teaching set design at Keene High School.



He still runs his farm in Sullivan with 21 beef cows, haying in season, and plenty of other chores. He's at the Nelson (NH) town hall every Monday night calling contra dances and is a member of the Jack-in-the-Green Morris dance team.

Last July, during a Monday-night dance, Primrose inconspicuously suffered another heart attack and was driven to the hospital by friends. Seventeen days later, he flew to England with the Morris team on a 10-day tour.

And on December 21, 2010, Primrose witnessed the reopening of the Hundred Nights Shelter with Mayor Pregent, assisted by several children, cutting the ribbon. During the worst of the weather last winter, the shelter remained opened 24 hours a day. It also offers educational programs and support during daytime hours at the drop-in center. In talking to Primrose about what enables him to function at what seems to be a super-human level, he conveys both humility and confidence – or perhaps it's defiance. He has a pretty good understanding of the underside of life. Just tell him something isn't so – if he knows otherwise. he'll swing into action.